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ONTARIO

Board to vote on Africentric school

School board trustees in Toronto are poised to vote on a staff recommendation to create an Africentric school as a means of increasing the proportion of black students who earn passing grades. In a report called "Improving Success for Black Students," the Toronto District School Board endorses establishing a team that would develop a model for an Africentric alternative school to open in September 2009. The report also recommends establishing a three-year pilot program in three existing schools beginning in September that would include a curriculum integrating the histories, cultures and experiences of people of African descent and other "racialized" groups. Trustees will vote on the recommendations in a special meeting next Tuesday.

The News EMC 17-01-2008

LOCAL NEWS

Arts Night at Ridgemont celebrates creativity

BY REBECCA SAALTINK

On Dec. 6, Ridgemont High School hosted its annual Arts night, an event celebrating the school's art program. Featured arts included visual arts, performances from the school band and skits performed by the drama classes.

The school band provided music throughout the show, with pieces from the junior, senior and jazz bands. Their repertoire ranged from traditional band pieces to lively Christmas tunes.

Grade 9, 10 and 12 art classes each presented samples of their work, which included paintings, clay sculptures and sketches, as well as decorated plates. These were available on sale throughout the night.

The drama club rounded out the show, with performances from drama classes of grades 10, 11 and 12. Topics ranged from the many meanings of the colour red, to the story of a man's death.

This annual event has gained overwhelming community support, with teachers, students, family and friends in attendance. The proceeds from the tickets went towards the arts programs at Ridgemont, and overall the event was a big hit among students and staff.

"The talent in our school is amazing," said Mr. Donato, a phys-ed teacher at Ridgemont. "It is a special feeling when you see one of your student/athletes per-

form not only on the court at 4 p.m. that same evening, but also on stage later that night."

Another feature was a preview of a scene from Shakespeare's As You Like It, the school play, which was performed Dec. 18, and 19.

Reactions from students and staff prove that the arts are still as important as ever at Ridgemont.

"(Art is important) to increase the creativity and originality of our students. To help them think conceptually, to be expressive, to be innovators... to boldly go where no man has gone before," said Mrs. Shelly, an art teacher at Ridgemont. "These are the adventures of the Ridgemont students."



Ridgemont High School students showed the community their creative sides at the school's recent arts night.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Sainte-Bernadette donates Christmas socks

SPECIAL TO THE NEWS EMC

A couple of days before Christmas, l'École élémentaire catholique Sainte-Bernadette, located in Blossom Park, collected and delivered more than 260 pairs of warm winter socks to the Union Mission for Men in downtown Ottawa.

This tradition at the school is in its 11th year now and is always a great rallying initiative for the students, parents and staff alike during the holiday season. This year, staff and students exceeded their objective by more than 10%. Also, some 250 baby food jars were collected at a popcorn-movie night and were donated to the Ottawa Food bank.

'A parent's worst nightmare': shattered glass and silence

A survivor's story: Karaoke at an on-campus bar, followed by a visit to a Nepean pub and then, in the blink of an eye, life is irrevocably changed. 'Their shoes are right there, their jackets are right there,' but they aren't coming home

Neco Cockburn, with files from Andrew Seymour, Thulasi

The Ottawa Citizen

Thursday, January 24, 2008

Monica Neacsu saw the bus lights before she blacked out and woke up inside the crumpled wreck of her boyfriend's SUV, her life changed in the blink of an eye.

Ms. Neacsu didn't know it at the time, but she was the luckiest of the five Carleton University students in the black Toyota 4Runner, which had been struck by a northbound OC Transpo bus at the intersection of Heron Road and Riverside Drive at about 1:50 a.m. yesterday.

Ms. Neacsu's boyfriend, Mark MacDonald, and her roommates, Vanessa Crawford and Brianne Deschamps, were dead. Another friend, Ben Gardiner, had been critically injured in the collision, which happened as they drove home after spending the night at a pub.



CREDIT:

Friends Brianne Deschamps, left, and Vanessa Crawford were killed in Wednesday's early morning crash at Heron and Riverside.

The collision is under investigation and police believe alcohol may have been a factor. The bus driver reportedly told officers he had the green light when his bus slammed into the driver's door of the SUV.

The deaths and the injuries suffered by the five students, who are between the ages of 19 and 20 and originally from various Ontario towns and cities, stunned their friends and relatives.

"It's a blur, it's a parent's worst nightmare," said Stephen Deschamps, whose daughter was among the victims, from his home in Petrolia.

Other families echoed the shock. "You never expect anything like this to happen to you and your family," said Mr. MacDonald's brother, Simon.

Ms. Neacsu, who was released from The Ottawa Hospital's Civic campus yesterday morning, said, "It really seems like a bad nightmare that you need to wake up from. Reality has not set in."

The 19-year-old woman wore a hospital-type gown and was watched by her concerned parents as she recalled her friends as funny, caring and understanding as she sat in the living room of her rented Ridgewood Avenue rowhouse, minutes away from the crash scene.

It's a space that only a day before had been shared with Ms. Crawford and Ms. Deschamps, her good friends.

"I understand what's happening, but their shoes are right there, their jackets are right there. They're going to be home any second," said Ms. Neacsu, who still had cotton swabs stuck to her arm. Her hand was bruised, her face was marked by abrasions, and she wore makeup from the night before.

The incident happened as the friends were on their way back from Grace O'Malley's pub after some of them spent the earlier part of the evening doing karaoke at Mike's Place, a bar on Carleton's campus.

Ms. Neacsu, a second-year bachelor of arts in law student who is originally from Toronto, was in the front passenger seat.

She said Mr. MacDonald drove as they headed west along Heron Road, about to make a left turn onto Riverside Drive.

As they chatted, a Britney Spears song played on the stereo, she said.

Ms. Neacsu remembers talking about plans to get up early to go to a 7 a.m. "boot camp" exercise session on campus with her roommates. Their goal was to go three times a week.

Then, Ms. Neacsu said, she saw the bus lights through what appeared to be a fog. She said she didn't know who had the right of way. The collision happened so quickly that she didn't have time to react, she said.

The impact sent the bus off the road into a snowbank. A traffic light standard was knocked down.

Ms. Neacsu woke up to find shattered glass and silence inside the vehicle. Passersby told her that help was on the way, she said.

Paramedics who arrived had to wait until firefighters used their equipment to get the five students out of the SUV, said Ottawa paramedic team leader Steve Leu. Three inside the SUV were pronounced dead at the scene.

Mr. Gardiner, who was unconscious, was treated for serious head injuries before being taken to The Ottawa Hospital's Civic campus in critical, but stable, condition.

The two men on the bus, its 62-year-old driver and a 38-year-old passenger who police say was an off-duty bus driver, were assessed at the scene and released.

Police closed the intersection through the morning rush hour, but it was reopened later as news of the crash spread.

At the start of yesterday's city council meeting, Mayor Larry O'Brien said city officials immediately felt grief when they heard of the accident.

"Council and the city's hearts and thoughts go out to the families and the friends of the victims of this tragic event," he said.

The intersection, equipped with a red-light camera -- which was not pointed in the direction of the crash -- is notoriously dangerous, with 28 collisions recorded in 2004 and a list-topping 39 in 2006, the last year for which figures are available.

But Ottawa police Staff Sgt. Rick Lavigne said the intersection's bad reputation was a bit of "red herring" as traffic volume was not high at that time in the morning.

Tom Fitzgerald, manager of traffic engineering for the city, said Ottawa's traffic control centre logs "second by second" records of which traffic lights are green and when. The department is co-operating with the police investigation, he said.

Mr. Fitzgerald could not comment on what the traffic control centre recorded prior to the crash, but said his department would have been notified instantly when the traffic light standard was knocked down and recorded which light was green.

When asked about the possibility that alcohol may have played a factor, Ms. Neacsu said she had not been with Mr. MacDonald constantly through the night. She said she trusted him as a driver. Staff Sgt. Lavigne said an autopsy will be conducted on the SUV's driver today. Toxicology results are expected in four to six weeks.

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Thursday » January
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Best friends died side by side

Housemates try to cope with loss after crash claims three

Katie Daubs, Tim Shufelt and Thulasi Srikanthan, with files from Andrew Seymour and Neco Cockburn

The Ottawa Citizen

Thursday, January 24, 2008

Ten hours before they died together at the intersection of Heron Road and Riverside Drive, Vanessa Crawford and Brianne Deschamps logged on to Facebook and changed their relationship status. At 3:52 p.m. Tuesday afternoon, with a little red heart on the page, the two friends "married" each other.

"They grew up together," said Brianne's father, Stephen Deschamps, from his home in Petrolia. "Her friends were everything to her. She just needed to have her friends around all the time."

And in the early hours of Jan. 23, his daughter ended her life as she lived it: surrounded by friends she loved.

The collision that made the Facebook entry the last for the two women also claimed the life of the SUV's driver, 20-year-old Mark MacDonald, of Arnprior. Their housemate, 19-year-old Monica Neacsu was hurt, but released from hospital, while a fifth friend, 20-year-old Ben Gardiner is in critical, but stable condition.

It was the second time that a fatal crash has affected Mr. Gardiner. On Halloween 2003, Mr. Gardiner's friend, 16-year-old Jon Smith, was killed in a crash involving a car in which he was a passenger.

Yesterday, on Ridgewood Avenue, Ms. Crawford's and Ms. Deschamps' housemates were trying to cope with the loss of their three close friends. They said although Mr. MacDonald didn't live there, he was virtually a permanent fixture at the house.

"Mark was like the sixth roommate that kept the estrogen down in the house. He balanced us out. He was just a great person. All round, a great person," Malika Welsh said.

Ms. Welsh said she had last seen her friends on Tuesday.

"We were all hanging out, just talking. Talking about our plans and what we would do in 2008," she said.

Ms. Crawford, a second-year psychology student with a flair for adventure, was looking forward to another round of skydiving and an Indian dance competition.

First-year general arts student Ms. Deschamps was planning an audition to get into Carleton's music program.

And Mr. Macdonald, an economics student in his second year, had dreams of his own construction or development business.

But early yesterday morning, the plans and dreams of the three friends came to a halt, and the effects of the devastating loss crossed the province to the families of the three Carleton students.

"You never expect anything like this to happen to you and your family," said Mr. MacDonald's brother, Simon, at the family home in Arnprior. "It makes you realize how precious life is."

Mr. MacDonald remembered his brother, his best friend, as ambitious and mature -- "almost an old man."

But there was another side, filled with spunk, feistiness and independent spirit, he said.

"Everyone loved to have him around," said his mother, Hazel MacDonald, adding that as the youngest of three children, "He was special to everyone."

Mr. MacDonald was born in Lethbridge, Alta., but moved with his family to Arnprior when he was young. He attended Arnprior District High School and later John McCrae High School.

Since he was a little boy, Mr. MacDonald was an avid swimmer. He swam for the

Nepean Kanata Barracudas and reached the national levels when he was in his mid-teens.

But the athletic youngest son defied definition. His mother recalled Mr. MacDonald had a fascination for Winston Churchill and liked to quote Shakespeare.

"He was very optimistic for his future plans, but God's plans were different," she said.

In Petrolia, Ont., Brianne Deschamps' father described the "huge void" left by her death.

"We have a very small family so everybody is taking it pretty bad," he said.

Stephen Deschamps had spoken to his eldest daughter on Tuesday and said she was in good spirits. She had just bought new books for the coming semester and was looking forward to coming home to Petrolia for reading week to take her final driving exam.

He said his daughter had come to Carleton in September eager to study music. She was planning to teach music after she graduated.

"Music was really her life," he said.

Mr. Deschamps described his daughter as someone who was close to her family, friends and had a special place in her heart for animals. She had even brought home some kittens last summer, he recalled.

Alongside her love for animals, he said his daughter was enamoured with Carleton University, Ottawa, and the friends she had made there.

He said he doesn't know where the group was headed last night.

"I wish we did," he said. "I wish they would have been in bed at 2 a.m. instead of driving around."

"But they are 19, right?"

Half an hour's drive from Petrolia is the small town of Corunna, Ont., where Vanessa Crawford grew up. Her family was shocked at the loss of the child with the magnetic personality, said her grandmother, Joan Crawford.

"She was full of a lot of life," she said. "She was always happy and smiling and willing to help anybody. Those are the only kind that get killed."

She remembered her granddaughter, an only child, as smart, popular and kind, with a lifelong passion for competitive dance.

As the news of her death made it to the dance school she studied at, the tap shoes fell silent.

"She was just a ray of light in this dance school," said Shirley Schram, of the Shirley Schram School of Dance in Sarnia.

She said Ms. Crawford began dancing around the age of 10 and stayed until she left for university. When she was old enough, she taught the younger girls. Her specialty was tap.

"She never was a quitter. When she was on stage, she just smiled and loved to be there." Mrs. Schram said.

Alheli Picazo, 23, danced alongside Ms. Crawford. She said the 19-year-old was never one to take part in the politics or gossip that sometimes arrive with competitive dance. "She always made you feel like you were included, welcome, and part of something," she said.

Jason McKechnie, 19, of Corunna remembers his friend in the same way. "She hated drama. That's one of the things I loved about her.

"She made her own life and she made her own decisions."

Mr. McKechnie met Ms. Crawford when a mutual friend thought they would be a good match. They became close friends, and Mr. McKechnie would often take her for rides on his motorcycle. In November, the two met up in Toronto to go skydiving.

Mr. McKechnie jumped out of the plane first, and gave her a high five "secret skydiving handshake" on his way out -- it's bad luck to say good luck.

"Her exit, everything in her first jump, was perfect -- by the book," he said.

Mr. McKechnie was a more experienced skydiver and was attempting a free fall, a more complicated manoeuvre. His first two attempts were botched, but the third, when Ms. Crawford was in the plane with him, was perfect.

"I did everything perfect. That one jump, when she was there with me," he said.

Childhood friend Sarah Taylor recently reconnected with Ms. Crawford and heard about the skydiving adventures.

She found it surprising considering her friend didn't seem to be the thrill-seeking type.

"She was more the elegant-dancer type," she said.

But like Mr. MacDonald, Vanessa Crawford defied a standard description. She meant different things to different people.

"She would never dance in front of me, but she would jump out of an airplane," Mr. Mckechnie said.

He last saw her at Christmas, on the day her family got back from a cruise. He said he only meant to stay for 10 minutes, but was there the entire afternoon, catching up and talking about jumping through the skies. They made plans to go for another jump, and to bring her father along.

Since that can't happen, Mr. Mckechnie has decided to dedicate all future skydiving jumps to her memory.

"I've never had anybody close to me die before. This is worse than I ever thought it was going to be," he said. "I've never cried over someone's death before, until I found out she was gone."

Mr. Mckechnie said he took some comfort in Ms. Crawford's facebook status, which reads: "Vanessa Crawford is singin' don't worry about a thing, cause every little thing is gunna be alright ... "

"That's one 100-per-cent her," he said.

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January 24, 2008

'I just remember seeing a bus' Survivor of crash which killed 3 tells of horror before impact

By AEDAN HELMER AND JON WILLING, SUN MEDIA

Tires screech across damp asphalt.

Panicked screams emerge from terrible chaos.

Metal meets metal in a hail of shattering glass.

Monica Neacsu, 19, remembers nothing of the moment that changed her life. The moment that took the life of her boyfriend, her roommates, her friends.

"I just remember seeing a bus, nothing else after that," said the girl who survived the horrific crash that killed three Carleton University students and sent another to hospital with life-threatening injuries.

The black 1992 Toyota 4Runner carrying the five friends back from a night of partying was only minutes from home when it was sideswiped by an OC Transpo bus.

Ottawa police, who are determined to retrace the route of the SUV, believe it travelled south on Bank St. before turning onto Heron Rd., eventually colliding with the out-of-service bus at the intersection of Riverside Dr. just before 2 a.m.

Dead are the driver of the SUV, Mark MacDonald, 20, of Arnprior and two passengers, Vanessa Crawford, 19, originally of Corunna, and Brianne Deschamps, 19, originally of Petrolia.

Ben Gardiner, 20, of Arnprior, who is also a student, was in critical condition at Ottawa Hospital's Civic campus last night.

Neacsu, a law student who is originally from Toronto, was treated and released from hospital with back injuries.

Police believe alcohol is a factor in the collision.

The coroner immediately ordered an autopsy on MacDonald but police wouldn't say what evidence supported their theory the crash might be alcohol-related.

Police are also ordering a mechanical inspection on both the SUV and bus.

No details of the accident are distinct in Neacsu's mind, but she has recollections of the night spent at Gracie O'Malley's in the city's west end -- the music, the revelry, piling in to MacDonald's SUV at last call, idle conversation on the route home.

Neacsu lived at her Ridgewood Ave. townhouse, just south of the notorious Heron-Riverside intersection, with Crawford and Deschamps. The girls, all campus friends, moved in together in August.

'INSTANT CONNECTION'

It was there, at a house party three months ago, that Neacsu met MacDonald. Though they were "opposite people," she felt an instant connection.

"He's one of a kind, he was very unique," said Neacsu, her voice wavering, wrought with exhaustion. "He

was always one to go after his dreams. He always dreamed big."

Crawford and Deschamps were "extremely outgoing, always willing to be there for you."

Police will likely look to Neacsu to piece together the final moments before the collision.

The bus, which was being used to transport other OC Transpo drivers, was operated by a 63-year-old man. Another driver, a 39-year-old man, was a passenger in the bus. Paramedics assessed both men, neither of whom require hospital treatment.

Witnesses have told police the bus had the green light.

It was a scene of destruction as both vehicles landed off the road and a light standard was propelled up the northbound median.

Sgt. Claude Pepin, who responded to the scene along with other East Division cops, described the SUV as "mangled" while the bus received heavy damage to its front end.

Collision investigators closed the intersection until around 10 a.m., creating traffic havoc on the busy commuter thoroughfare.

It's unknown if traffic cameras at the intersection will help police. It appears the cameras were not directed at the point of impact.

Staff Sgt. Rick Lavigne, who manages the traffic and public safety unit, said the Heron-Riverside intersection has been a trouble spot for serious collisions.

In 2006, there were 39 crashes at the intersection, which was considered the worst in the city that year.

It was also the location for a T-bone crash in September 2005 between a taxi and a police cruiser that killed a 20-year-old woman in the taxi.

"We have taken steps to improve that intersection," Lavigne said.

It will be a nightmarish landmark for Neacsu, who doesn't remember the fatal impact.

"I blacked out," said Neacsu. "When I woke up, the ambulance was already there."

The street littered with debris, the car's wreckage twisted in a cruel cast.

She was the lucky one.

Anyone with information about the crash is asked to call collision investigators at 613-236-1222, ext. 2470.

January 24, 2008



Russell Twp.'s council has sent the bilingual sign issue off for study, but the debate still tears at the municipality's fabric

By **TOM VAN DUSEN**

RUSSELL VILLAGE -- Reaction continues fast and furious in this predominantly English-speaking enclave in the wake of council's decision Monday to launch a task force to investigate the possible ramifications of a bilingual signage bylaw.

"Things have gone so berserk," said village resident Terry Smith. "It's sad to see my community being divided."

Smith said when she moved to Russell 10 years ago, she knew nothing about French-English tensions and picked the village because she liked the look and feel of it. Now she's worried about her residential property losing value in the flurry of negative publicity surrounding the sign issue.

Contrary to what some other residents are saying, Smith said she won't sell and move if a sign bylaw eventually passes. That's because two years ago, when her husband was killed in a tragic accident, the entire community, English and French, rallied in support.

FOLLOWING EXAMPLE

Russell Village and Embrun, which is primarily francophone, are the two main population centres in Russell Twp. which is considering following the example of three municipal neighbours and requiring bilingual commercial signs.

Ratepayer Jean-Guy Patenaude triggered the effort by requesting the municipality look at such a bylaw as a means of satisfactorily servicing the francophone population while clearly reflecting the cultural composition of what is an officially bilingual municipality.

Rather than push forward Monday with a notice of motion, council decided to gear down the process by handing the issue off to a task force made up of Mayor Ken Hill, senior municipal administrator Pierre Tessier, and four members of the two local chambers of commerce.

The task force has been asked to present terms of reference by March 17 while staff has been told to draft a notice of motion on bilingual signage by Feb. 19. Because the issue is so divisive, Hill said the prudent thing is to go slow and avoid mistakes.

The task force was a joint recommendation from Russell chamber president Corey Butler and Embrun chamber president Ron Theriault, both of whom made it clear the business community opposes enforced signage for any reason.

In a related process, council is considering offering all of its documentation in French and English, part of ensuring that its own house is in order before requiring any action from businesses.

The task force approach hasn't appeased angry residents. Smith's reaction is typical of that of several residents questioned on the street and in village shops yesterday.

Pledging to put a "For Sale" sign on her lawn if a sign bylaw is enacted, fluently bilingual Pauline Smith (no relation to Terry) doesn't appreciate that business people might be forced to comply. She faults the chambers of commerce for collaborating with council on the task force.

She's one of many residents who believe the outcome is preordained, with council determined to proceed no

matter what the task force comes up with.

MISREPRESENT STORE

Steve Bourguignon, whose family operates a movie rental outlet and U-Haul franchise, said he worries that bilingual signage would misrepresent what goods and services are available inside the store.

Barber Kat Alderson said posting a bilingual sign on her shop could lead to a human rights complaint from someone expecting service in French deciding to retaliate if it wasn't available.

Although she loves the community, Alderson said she'll refuse to post in two languages if a bylaw comes into being, and possibly return to southwestern Ontario.

Bill Young said council --particularly the mayor -- has committed political suicide by causing a major rift in the community.

"Do we live in a communist country where we have to be told what language to put on our signs?" complained apartment building owner Mike Clarmo, adding that if a bylaw goes through, he'll do no further shopping in Russell Twp.

"They should just leave private business alone," said pub owner Terry Robinson.